

DEATH IN POST-CLASSICAL SCREEN STORYTELLING

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## **Abstract**

The previously published works that form the basis for this submission span from 2009 to 2021. Though the seven chapters and articles represent a wide range of genres and forms of storytelling for the screen, the shared context for the works examined is post-classical cinema, a designation with a debated history within film studies. These publications contribute to the field of film studies a close examination of death as a subject within screen narratives, drawing on complex issues of death, such as death and reality (whether or not death is experientially real), temporality (including the juxtaposition of finitude and infinity), affect (the balance of intellect and emotion regarding death), spatiality, and how death reveals and/or destroys the individual self. The various methods and methodologies used for the writings included in this submission involve sorting narrative themes, identifying the role of death and fatal violence within cinematic discourse, tracing the depictions of mortality in the filmographies of auteurs, and exploring the particular qualities of death depictions in television and documentary screen stories (as distinct from fictional feature-length narrative cinema).

The submission illuminates how existing screen theories and theories of death share several features, particularly in their attention to perception, causality, time, and space. The thesis argues that the emphasis on death as a subject occurs in tandem with various advances in post-classical screen storytelling, in part because modern films can mediate the viewer's experience of time and space with increasing formal complexity as they depict death scenarios, often in an unflinching manner that classical-era film content regulation and ratings would not allow. Yet those realities of post-classical cinema often highlight the limitations of human beings' ability to experience death, which is a central issue in death studies, with innovations in screen storytelling being attempts to represent the content and perception of death, which can only ever be experienced through approximation and

metaphor. The findings are useful for screenwriters and filmmakers interested in innovating within screen storytelling by portraying the subject of death on screen.

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## **Author's Declaration**

I declare that the research contained in this document, unless otherwise formally indicated within the text, is the original work of the author. The document has not been previously submitted to this or any other university for a degree and does not incorporate any material already submitted for a degree.

Thomas Britt

27 June 2023

## I. Introduction

### a. Cinematic Epochs

Death has been a subject of film since the earliest years of the art form. In the first year of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, two innovative short films, Edwin S. Porter's *Execution of Czolgosz with Panorama of Auburn Prison* (1901) and Ferdinand Zecca's *Histoire d'un crime* (1901) depicted scenarios of capital punishment in which the criminals die on screen, the former in the electric chair and the latter at the guillotine. The death scenarios in these films provided Porter and Zecca opportunities to make imaginative use of film techniques, with Porter blending documentary footage and historical reenactment to chronicle the death of a real presidential assassin and Zecca integrating flashbacks and superimposed images to convey causal social issues for which state-sanctioned death is the final effect. These two films are evidence that even in the beginnings of cinema, it was possible to experiment with the elements of causality, time, and space that David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson have argued constitute the key elements of the narrative form (2010, 79).

Classical cinema, sometimes referred to as classical Hollywood cinema--a modifier that nevertheless describes a significant influence on international cinema--is remembered as an epoch beginning around 1930 during which, according to film theorist André Bazin, 'all the technical requirements for the art of cinema' were 'available' (1967, 30) and after achieving a stable form of expression during a decade, 'the introduction of new blood, of hitherto unexplored themes' (1967, 29) occurred from 1940 to 1950. Bazin specifies that this 'new blood' was more a 'revolution...of subject matter than of style' (1967, 29), pointing out the groundbreaking themes within postwar 'Italian cinema and...native English cinema' that were emerging at the time (1967, 29).

In *A Dictionary of Media and Communication*, Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday characterize 'classical Hollywood cinema' from the 1930s through the 1950s as prioritizing

'conventions of narrative, camerawork, and editing employed' in 'major Hollywood' films with a 'classical narrative structure', especially 'the convention or code of invisible or continuity editing' and 'a style that foregrounds the narrative and backgrounds the processes of construction involved in making a film' (2011), reinforcing the concept that regardless of the broadening range of subject matters featured in films of this classical period, the dominant stylistic conventions and narrative structure remained entrenched through the 1960s.

The post-classical period, which is the epoch beginning in the 1960s and continuing into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is the context for the publications that compose this submission about death in cinema. Peter Kramer has written about post-classical Hollywood regarding 'the disintegration or displacement of classical narration and of the studio system as the dominant forms of aesthetic and institutional organization within mainstream American cinema' (2000, 63), thereby predicating the post-classical on the death of the previous stability enjoyed by classical Hollywood filmmaking. There is also a significant development of critical opinion extending from Bazin to Bordwell and beyond on the subject of post-classical cinema. Bazin's writing at the end of the classical period and beginning of the post-classical period heralded a time in which 'the image--its plastic composition and the way it is set in time' would now have 'at its disposal more means of manipulating reality and of modifying it from within' (1967, 39-40).

Nearly half a century after Bazin prognosticated a new phase of screen storytelling, Bordwell cited Bazin's erstwhile praise of 'a coherent approach to genre, plot, and style that can assimilate a great range of thematic material' (Bordwell 2006, 14) to argue against the emergence of a full-blown post-classical period, stating instead that '[t]he premises of Hollywood filmmaking host an indefinitely large number of artistic strategies. Some of those

strategies have become the most common options; others are imaginative ways of working within the tradition' (2006, 14).

Following Bordwell in a similar manner to the way Bordwell was indebted to Bazin, Eleftheria Thanouli aimed in her book *Post-Classical Cinema: An International Poetics of Film Narration* (2009) 'to use Bordwell's very own weapons [Bordwell's film study approach of historical poetics, introduced in the 1980s] to fight his objection to the existence of a new paradigm and to discover a new angle about narration in contemporary cinema' (2009, 26). Bordwell's historical poetics, and Thanouli's subsequent observations about the principles that govern post-classical film construction, covering a range of motivations, systems of cinematic time and space, and narration styles, are important precedents for this submission, in which I investigate the way films are constructed around death and the effects of that construction. One could also review the timeframes in which these theorists were writing and see that notable films about death, from various national cinemas, were being produced as these theories of classical and post-classical cinema emerged. For example, Akira Kurosawa's *Ikiru* (1952) was released the year after Bazin co-founded the film magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) was released in the same year as the popular English translations of Bazin's *What is Cinema?* began to be published, and Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire* (1987) was released directly in between the publication of Bordwell's *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1985) and *Making Meaning* (1989).

The previously published works included in this submission span a 12-year period from 2009 to 2021. All of the films and television series examined in these works and reflected on in this submission fall into the post-classical historical period. For the purposes of this submission, the mid-1960s is a starting point for this period, characterized by screen stories about death that utilize one or some combination of the following artistic strategies that Bordwell associates with modern storytelling: 'oblique and ambiguous storytelling', 'a



realism driven by characterization and mood and framed within familiar genres', and other breaks with 'classical norms' including 'paradoxical time schemes, hypothetical futures, digressive and dawdling action lines, stories told backward and in loops, and plots stuffed with protagonists' (2006, 72-73).

## **b. Structure of the Submission and Summary of Previously Published Work**

The screen stories considered in the works constituting the submission involve death as a central narrative element around which technical/stylistic choices were made. Section II of the submission covers additional contexts and literature outlining the study of death and the study of narrative filmmaking, considering parallels between death theories and screen theories. This section pays special attention to theories that arose or were published during the post-classical period. Section III is the most substantial section of the submission, which includes the analysis and discussion of the previously published works, which are presented non-chronologically. After Section IV's conclusion and the bibliography, the Appendix contains the previously published works in the order in which they are addressed in this bridging chapter.

The methods and methodologies used in this thesis are all versions of textual analysis, in which I examine different aspects of narrative and cinematographic construction in the tradition of Bordwell's historical poetics. Textual analysis is an ideal approach for my thesis because it begins by engaging the works as they exist onscreen (or on the script page) rather than imposing factors from without or surveying audience members for subjective reactions to screen stories. The specific elements of textual analysis in this submission include themes (thematic variations on a common topic, in this case, death), structure (the order and shape of the narratives), genre (the stylistic categories), and screen authorship (considering the filmmaker as an auteur), all as they relate to the feature film form, which is the dominant form in the submission and the form generally engaged with in discussions of post-classical

cinema. I follow these considerations of death in feature films with a comparative exploration of other forms, including serialized dramas (sustained narratives exhibited on television or streaming outlets) and feature-length documentaries (non-fiction works), both of which include many of the same narrative and cinematographic elements included in my textual analysis, relative to the purposes of serialized or documentary storytelling.

The research question underlying the submission is, what is the relationship between theories and speculations regarding death and theories of cinematographic and narrative construction, and how do post-classical screen stories illustrate concepts of death? 'Death in Modern Film,' the first chapter discussed, was a chapter written on an invitation for inclusion in *The Routledge History of Death Since 1800* (2021). This chapter illustrates how filmmakers from different nations and working within different genres use the tools of screenwriting and filmmaking to arrive at three themes: the death of self, the death of family members, and the social dimensions of death.

Following this thematic overview that also acquaints the reader with a wide variety of post-classical approaches to filmmaking, the submission pivots to the earliest article represented in the previously published works, 'Lower Depths and Higher Aims: Death, Excess and Discontinuity in *Irreversible* and *Visitor Q*' (2009), which appeared in *Cinephile*, and 'Igniting the Fuse of Destructive History: Nation and Ablation in the sLaughterhouse,' a chapter from the volume *Horrific Humor and the Moment of Droll Grimness in Cinema: Sidesplitting sLaughter* (2018). Both of these works use a variation of historical poetics to assess post-classical uses of structure and genre through which filmmakers comment on the violence and death of nations.

The submission then turns to a journal article profiling an individual filmmaker. This article examines Kathryn Bigelow's filmography to trace her evolving perspective on the death instinct or death drive in action dramas, as reflected in both narrative and

technical/stylistic choices over time. Bigelow's penchant for action-oriented life-or-death scenarios is featured in 'Variations on the "lonely walk" in the films of Kathryn Bigelow' (2021), which was published in *New Review of Film and Television Studies*.

The collection of previously published works concludes with two formal exceptions to the primary focus on fictional feature films. The inclusion of these exceptions is motivated in part by the present-day equalization of forms as all *content*--feature films, serialized storytelling, and non-fiction work--that shares similar narrative principles within the streaming marketplace. The first of these is a digression on television/streaming series that includes "'Between Two Mysteries': Intermediacy in *Twin Peaks: The Return*" from the volume *Critical Essays on Twin Peaks: The Return* (2019) and "'Came Back Haunted': International Horror Film Conventions in *The Haunting of Hill House*" from *The Streaming of Hill House* (2020). These chapters spotlight how contemporary serialized drama is suited for stories about afterlives and alternate/extra dimensions beyond the material world. The second is a unit regarding documentary filmmaking in which a short essay previously published in the now-defunct *Jura Gentium Cinema*, 'Picturing the Last Moments of Life' (2013), draws together three documentaries that use various editing techniques to narrate the last moments of their subjects' lives. This essay concerns the greater moral imperatives for which image-makers have been said to be responsible and how the event of actual death shapes that moral consideration for filmmakers engaged in such a documentary endeavor.

By identifying these various ways in which post-classical screen stories express death scenarios, the submission establishes death as an especially apt subject for contemporary narrative and stylistic cinematic techniques. The submission also demonstrates how filmmakers can continue to expand the boundaries of understanding concerning death and the film form, anticipating the next epoch of film production and reception.

## II. Contexts and Literature

### a. Theories and Speculations about Death

One of the foremost issues in death studies, and a fundamental theme of this submission and the screen stories it examines, is the question of whether death is real. In the book *Is There an Answer to Death?* (1976) Peter Koestenbaum summarizes the 'basic philosophical point made in the study of death' thus: 'Death is not an experience but either a felt anticipation or a sorrowful loss' (1976, 7). Koestenbaum sees death as preeminent among human concerns in its revelation of human nature, arguing that '*[t]he anticipation of our death reveals to us who we are. It is an intellectual revelation...But it is also an experiential understanding, in that death puts us in touch with our deepest feelings*' (1976, 7; italics in the original).

These two components of intellect and emotion, through which human beings define and experience their lives and selves, towards death, are the same two elements screenwriting expert Robert McKee proposes as the two 'sides of human nature' film screenwriters appeal to as the design of their stories 'capture[s] interest' and ultimately 'reward[s] it' (1997, 346). McKee argues that the intellectual side produces curiosity and the emotional side produces concern--human needs that line up closely with Koestenbaum's framework of anticipation and loss.

For McKee, the viewer of a screen story is wholly engaged when they are both curious about what will happen in a plot's design as well as concerned for the values that will emerge. This dual intellectual-emotional investment in a film plot occurs even though the viewer is not present for an actual scenario and is not active in the causality thereof. Rather, the viewer is an engaged spectator located outside of the plot but using their physical faculties, cognition, and emotion to encounter a representation of events that are purportedly happening to other, usually fictional, beings.

Jeff Mason has declared that '[a]ll we can say about death is that it is either real or it is not real' (2015), but regardless of which of these options is true, no one among the living can speak authoritatively about death in certain terms, and the dead are no longer present to confirm death's truth. Mason writes, '[i]f it is real, then the end of one's life is a simple termination. If it is not real, then the end of one's embodied life is not true death, but a portal to another life. Having no content, we must speak of death metaphorically. For those who think death is real, death is a blank wall. For those who think it is not real, death is a door to another life' (2015). The second half of Section II goes into further detail about the approximation and manipulation of reality within screen stories, but first, it is worthwhile to expand on a set of limits related to Mason's theory, which is human beings' restricted capacity to participate in and anticipate death.

Koestenbaum declares that, in epistemological terms, 'our knowledge of the experience of death is either our participation in the real or expected death of another person or it is the anticipation of our own' (1976, 14). This position regarding death--that it is an event that happens or will happen to someone else and a personal eventuality that can be expected but not experienced--follows from Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death* (1973), an influential book in death studies, concerned with how humans manage their awareness of mortality. Becker describes *The Denial of Death*, a book largely about the link between heroism and death, as 'a network of arguments based on the universality of the fear of death, or "terror"...in order to convey how all-consuming it is when we look it full in the face' (1973, 15). In Becker's theory, it is possible to look at death with a generative fear that casts the self as a hero (a context conducive to narrative theory), but it is ultimately not possible to conquer death, heroically or otherwise. Death is, for everyone, the end of the story.

Allusions to creativity, narrative elements, and screen stories occur frequently in theories and speculations about death. Koestenbaum describes death as 'a word, an idea, and

even an image', arguing, '[i]f I accept that image as real (and without proof, strictly speaking), it produces the feeling that I am an ego,' a process that results in death being an individually determined invention (1976, 85). Geoffrey Scarre begins *Death*, his study of mortality, with comparisons between death and screen or stage stories, declaring that 'Death is the end of the script with no hope of a sequel', and adding '...to anyone who believes that death is extinction of the self, there is henceforth no me to suffer any loss. Death is the end not only of the play but of the actor' (2007, 2). Becker draws together several of the preceding concerns when discussing 'the limits of human nature', concluding that humans are physically and psychologically incapable of true transcendence and that at most, a 'new birth' for humans would exist in the form of 'new forms of art, music, literature, [and] architecture that would be a continual transformation of reality' (1973, 277). Becker concludes that *the real*, of which death, in its unavoidability, is arguably the most universal actual constituent, can be transformed but never fully overcome or denied. This firm quality of death simultaneously motivates one function of screen stories to be aesthetically transformative expressions on the subject of death and reinforces the impression that all such creative works on the subject are themselves limited. Also on the subject of death and limits, Ludwig Wittgenstein situates death outside of lived experience and characterizes living through the language of visual perception, writing that 'Death is not an event of life. Death is not lived through...Our life is endless in the way that our visual field is without limit' (1933, 185).

Before moving on to pertinent theories of screen storytelling, one final text to note regarding theories and speculations about death is the recent writing of Cairns Craig on writer Muriel Spark. Of Spark's fictional works, which Craig contextualizes within existentialist traditions, Craig writes:

[t]hey are governed not by the death of art but by the acceptance that art itself has more in common with death than it has with life ... The art of death enacts the necessary failure of the aesthetic to redeem us from time by translating time into the

endless repetition that is art: its 'truth' consists in unveiling the illusions through which its apparent defiance of time is constructed. (2019, 217-218)

Thus there is an observable relationship between Becker's theory, that new art forms have the potential to somewhat transform our experience of reality but not to redeem humankind, and Craig's perspective on Spark's death-saturated narrative fiction, her 'art of death': that art concerned with death is not a substitute for death's real reckoning, and that its variations and repetitions emphasize that lack. Death in screen stories, a topic the next section examines, exists on a polarity between truth and illusion, grounded in 'a confusion' Bazin claims exists at the center of a 'quarrel over realism in art...between true realism, the need that is to give significant expression to the world both concretely and its essence, and the pseudorealism of a deception aimed at fooling the eye (or for that matter the mind)' (1967, 12).

## **b. Screen Theories, Reality, and Death**

Bazin's predictions about evolutions that were possible in cinema because of the means of manipulating and modifying reality were based on his observation about two types of filmmakers that were emerging in cinema predating the classical period: 'those directors who put their faith in the image and those who put their faith in reality' (24). This dichotomy remains stable throughout the classical and post-classical periods, even if the tools at filmmakers' disposal have also evolved. A later contrast that corresponds to this division between image-based and reality-based filmmaking is that offered by critic and historian Leo Braudy in *The World in a Frame* (1984). Focusing his framework in spatial terms, Braudy distinguishes between 'open' and 'closed' film forms, commenting as some death theorists have on the relationship between art and reality: 'Too often we accept a film as a window on reality without noticing that the window has been opened in a particular way, to exclude as well as to include' (1984, 22).

For Braudy, a 'closed film' is one in which 'the world of the film is the only thing that exists' and such films are designed with an 'illusion of sufficiency, feeling that there is no

other world' (1984, 46-47). By contrast, an 'open film' is one in which 'the world of the film is a momentary frame around an ongoing reality' (1984, 46). Braudy further distinguishes between open and closed styles thus: 'In the closed film the frame of the screen totally defines the world inside as a picture frame does; in the open film the frame is more like a window, opening a privileged view on a world of which other views are possible' (1984, 48).

Though Braudy's theory is not explicitly concerned with films about death, there is a similarity between his dual film forms and Mason's opposing death perceptions. Specifically, Braudy's picture frame is analogous to Mason's wall metaphor, as there is no other world beyond the finite limits of the screen. Alternatively, Braudy's window is analogous to Mason's door metaphor, as there is an ongoing reality beyond the one presently visible. There is also a correspondence between these polarities and Bazin's image-based and reality-based filmmaking, and it is important to note that Mason's 'not real' conception of death is an extension of Bazin's theory that reality-based filmmakers capture reality, but they are neither omnipresent nor omniscient: 'The camera cannot see everything at once but it makes sure not to lose any part of what it chooses to see' (1967, 27).

The way the camera sees the substance of a screen story is significant in another distinction made in discussions of cinema and realism. Berys Gaut, when discussing the limits of the Dogma 95 manifesto/movement, breaks down the conception of cinematic realism into two categories: '*content* realism' and '*perceptual* realism' (2003, 98), a distinction that Stephen Prince also raised in the article 'True Lies: Perceptual Realism, Digital Images, and Film Theory' written and published contemporarily with the beginnings of Dogma 95. Prince's article involves cinematic realism, both 'a matter of reference' as well as 'a matter of perception', with 'perceptual realism' having been (in Prince's estimation) overlooked by film theorists (1996, 28). Distinguishing categories of both content/reference and perception is relevant to this submission, which considers post-classical screen stories about death; yet



post-classical cinema theorists such as Thanouli are more often concerned with the perceptual qualities of film than the content, a reversal of the conditions Prince identified in the mid-1990s.

For example, Thanouli's writing on motivations in post-classical cinema spotlight compositional, realistic, generic, and artistic modes affecting how the content in the films is arranged to be perceived by an audience. Her observations about cinematic space and cinematic time involve graphic (rather than photographic) space and temporal instability/flexibility. Her schema of cinematic narration is concerned with heightened 'self-consciousness' 'knowledgeability' and 'communicativeness' concerning information in the narrative (2009, 177-181). With very few exceptions, this 'post-classical paradigm' she advances is about perception rather than content.

The primary subject of the screen stories covered in this submission is death, which is always merely speculative as represented content. That is, if death is widely understood to be an event that can be anticipated but not personally experienced, then any attempt to evaluate the comparative realism of death as content and/or as an object mediated by techniques of perception is necessarily without evidence. Thus, while some of the screen stories herein involve greater or lesser degrees of cinematic realism in an overall sense (or in the Bazinian sense), cinematic death representations are persistently not real because there is no standard for comparison.

These complications of content and perception do not, however, cause death to be an unworthy subject for screen stories. In fact, these limits align with the screen theory advanced by Christian Metz in the 1970s, a period Bordwell characterizes as including increasing experimentation within the story and style of Hollywood feature films. Metz writes that the cinema spectator 'is absent from the screen...In this sense the screen is not a mirror...At the cinema it is always the other who is on the screen; as for me, I am there to look at him' (1982,

48). When defined this way, cinema spectatorship is an activity that already delineates the object from the spectator and maintains that separation, no matter how immersive the experience of watching and listening to a screen story might seem on a perceptual level. Therefore, screen storytelling is well suited for death representations because death is similarly only experienced when looking at the other.

Metz's theory of spectatorship is influential on this submission because the previously published works mostly emphasize the death experiences of characters in the screen stories rather than the spectator's specious identification with them. Craig's phrase, 'the art of death', is an efficient way to summarize these screen stories, which simultaneously speculate on death experiences in a way that real life cannot and also constantly reinforce their own status as fiction or as mere representations. 'Death in Modern Film' (2021), the first previously published work included in Section III, considers a range of cinematic representations depicting the effects of death on the self, the family, and greater social units. 'Death in Modern Film' is a useful starting point for analysis and discussion because the chapter spans several decades and different national cinemas to highlight post-classical screenwriting and filmmaking techniques that embody the theories summarized in Section II.

### **III. Analysis and Discussion**

#### **a. 'Death in Modern Film' and Thematic Variations**

In 'Death in Modern Film,' I specify that the films selected for the chapter were 'selected mainly because they feature choices regarding death--acceptance or avoidance thereof--as the foremost narrative component' (2021, 425). This classification affords the characters in the films a privileged position regarding death, relative to the place occupied by the spectator who is absent from the screen. Specifically, the characters in the films exist within fixed narratives for which every event, and associated causality, has been crafted by a

screenwriter. Thus the apparent choices are contrived and occur within narratives for which death is a defining event.

Furthermore, these human characters on screen are themselves engaging in 'acceptance or avoidance' within texts that are designed to or manage to, encourage reflection on the limits of human agency in confronting death. Identification with such characters provides an experience akin to vicariously rehearsing one's own confrontation with death, though the intended audiences for the films are not themselves designed to be models for managing reactions to death. These are merely a couple of the ways in which the identifying viewer is less characteristically equipped to meet death in a meaningful way, compared with the characters in the screen stories.

These distinctions between onscreen characters and offscreen viewers are of significance to the 'art of death' as a process with ongoing effects, even as the narratives are fixed. In *An Ontological Study of Death* (2007), Sean Ireton discusses metaphysics and ontology as being motivated by the inevitability of death:

[D]eath is a crude but necessary occurrence that humans are powerless to prevent but must somehow come to grips with. By allowing death to inform rather than simply terminate our lives, we are able to rise above our creaturely state and gain a certain measure of freedom, whether through metaphysical hope in the hereafter or a more immanent sense of existential fulfillment. (2007, 6)

Neither the constructed character nor the spectator is free from the event of death, but for reflective spectators, film characters' contrived encounters with death offer models for confronting the unavoidability of death. 'Death in Modern Film' examines three thematic variations on this process: 'Sin, consequences, and the death of self' (2021, 426), 'After life: the deaths of loved ones' (2021, 430), and 'Social and familial dimensions of death' (2021, 433). I explore these themes through associated texts that include both perspectives in Ireton's study: metaphysical--death 'as a constituent aspect of nonbeing' (2007, 2)--and ontological--death 'as an integral phenomenon of life' (2007, 2).

'Death in Modern Film' builds on Bordwell and Thompson's conception of narrative themes as the result of 'very broad concepts' that come from 'the abstract quality of implicit meanings' (2010, 64), including their suggestion that 'the search for implicit meanings should not leave behind the *particular* and *concrete* features of a film' (2010, 64; italics in the original). My focus on post-classical texts grounds the analysis of themes in film styles and origins that vary but also provide opportunities for comparison because of how the realization of these themes corresponds to contemporaneous theories and speculations regarding death.

For example, the first theme in the chapter, 'sin, consequences, and the death of self' explores Nakagawa Nobuo's *Jigoku* (1960), a Japanese horror film, Albert Brooks's *Defending Your Life* (1991), an American romantic comedy, and Guido van Driel's *The Resurrection of a Bastard* (2013), a Dutch gangster film. These texts share few surface similarities outside of a protagonist who dies and must face the consequences. However, one 'particular and concrete' feature of each of these films is the way the characters' judgments correspond to a view summarized by Ireton but historically developed by Heidegger: an existential rather than dialectical view of mortality in which 'death increasingly acquires an individualizing function' as 'the determining factor of self-hood' (2007, 282).

Thus, these characters realize who they are individually, in the truest sense, through their experiences of death. It is only through the perceptual qualities offered by the narrative and cinematic techniques that they can be present for their own becoming. *Defending Your Life* literalizes this process by having events from the deceased character's life play out on fragmented screens within the cinema screen and *The Resurrection of a Bastard* does so more subtly, through overhead cinematography and parallel editing that imply an omniscient view of self. Furthermore, these three characters are spectators for their own ended lives, a position that complicates the binaries of metaphysical/ontological, open/closed, not real/real binaries.

*Jigoku* is the most closed of the three films, insofar as much of the film resembles a theatrical or operatic production rather than a conventional film story. It is also the earliest of the films included in this submission, but it is an important example of the use of what Thanouli calls 'graphic space' (2009, 178) within post-classical cinema's formal system. The film's rendering of Hell illustrates the incapability of testing death representations as realistic or unrealistic. That is, while the props, sets, and effects do not look convincing in a photorealistic sense, there is no one alive who could provide an audiovisual standard of Hell as a location to be replicated on screen. *Jigoku* is therefore a departure from both conflicting branches of artistic realism that Bazin identifies (true realism versus pseudo-realism), presenting an impossible cinematic space that is not available to users in their material reality. The film's protagonist cannot accept his damnation, and the film's post-classical flexibility of temporal and narrative activity reads as a hollow measure for changing one's fate.

The second theme of 'Death in Modern Film', which is 'After life: the deaths of loved ones', also shares the first theme's skepticism about changing fate from a position of death, yet all three of the films come to emphasize that death is not real, in the sense that Mason discusses. The shift of emphasis and focalization from protagonists who have died to protagonists who have survived the deaths of others allows the filmmakers to produce a climactic dramatic effect from the survivors' eventual realization that death is not real and that their loved ones remain. Again, the films in the grouping utilize post-classical techniques to express the theme. Jacques Doillon's *Ponette* (1996) concludes with a decisive instance of 'subjective realism' (2009, 177) that brings a dead mother back from the grave for one scene only, and Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life* (2011) exhibits 'complex chronology' (2009, 179) that alternates within a span from the Big Bang to the shore of eternity.

## **b. Imaging Bodily Destruction and the Violence of Nations**

Among the nine films examined in 'Death in Modern Film', only one (*Jigoku*) was a horror film. The next previously published work in the submission, which is the earliest publication included, focuses on two thriller/horror films that use aggressive formal methods to showcase the deaths of individual bodies while at the same time situating the onscreen violence as being emblematic of larger social and historical contexts of destruction. Paul Wells has argued that 'horror texts engage with the collapse of social/socialised formations' that 'range from the personal to the familial, the communal, the national, and the global' (2000, 9-10). This notion of 'collapse' is an effective way to frame Gaspar Noé's *Irreversible* (2002) and Miike Takashi's *Visitor Q* (2001), the works that are the subjects of 'Lower Depths and Higher Aims: Death, Excess and Discontinuity in *Irreversible* and *Visitor Q*' (2009). In this section, I will reflect on *Irreversible* as a film that utilizes post-classical narrative techniques to restore that which has collapsed by examining death from a temporal perspective not available in reality.

## **i. Death and Narrative Structure**

'New French Extremity' was James Quandt's label for the grouping of violent French movies to which *Irreversible* belongs. In his influential *Artforum* article 'Flesh & Blood: Sex and Violence in Recent French Cinema' (2004), Quandt criticized 'the growing vogue for shock tactics in French cinema' (2004, 126) that he linked to 'the collapse of ideology' (2004, 132) in French society. Quandt's identification of ideological collapse links his analysis to Wells' recognition of collapse as a central element of horror texts, though for Quandt, the violence of the films amounts to 'a grandiose form of passivity' (2004, 132) rather than a constructive theme. While 'Lower Depths and Higher Aims' does not cite Quandt's critical view of this type of filmmaking, the article does engage more favorably with the violent content of both *Irreversible* and *Visitor Q*, arguing that 'their structural vigor and keen

attention to processes of spectator perception and participation, buttress the films with a depth and unity that is missing from much of "shock cinema" (2009).

The most noteworthy post-classical technique that Noé uses is a reverse chronology that is in effect for the duration of the film. This approach to the entirety of a feature film was uncommon before Oldřich Lipský's *Happy End* (1967), a film whose narrative bookends of death and birth are likewise shared by *Irreversible*. Unlike *Happy End*, however, whose comic ruminations on causality and regeneration are delivered via film sequences that physically play in reverse, *Irreversible* communicates the film's theme, 'time destroys everything', by showing individual sequences that play in conventional forward motion but are edited in reverse order, from effect to cause, throughout the plot.

Whereas many underlying theories about death use spatial metaphors, such as Mason's wall/door comparisons, *Irreversible* focuses the viewer's attention on the temporal aspects of life and death. As a result of the reverse structure, *Irreversible* ends with the promise of new life in the form of a pregnant woman. The preceding action of the film includes later, grave narrative events such as a brutal rape of the pregnant character and a man being beaten to death with a fire extinguisher. 'Lower Depths and Higher Aims' largely concerns the effects of this structure on the viewer's attitudes towards screen violence, but for this submission, it is equally worthwhile to examine the relationship between the screen technique and the perspective of the doomed characters within the narrative.

In *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, Slavoj Žižek uses a classical Hollywood film, Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca* (1942) to illustrate his point about how the conclusion of a film retroactively affects the apparent coherence of preceding narrative events. Žižek writes:

[T]he experience of a linear 'organic' flow of events is an illusion (albeit a necessary one) that masks the fact that it is the ending that retroactively confers the consistency of an organic whole on the preceding events. What is masked is the radical contingency of the enchainment of narration, the fact that, at every point, things might

have turned out otherwise. But if this illusion is a result of the very linearity of the narration, how can the radical contingency of the enchainment of events be made visible? The answer is, paradoxically: by proceeding in a reverse way, by presenting the events backward, from the end to the beginning. (1993, 69)

The post-classical reverse structure of *Irreversible* achieves precisely what Žižek describes because effects precede causes within the flow of the film's series of events. Each successive scene presents a new (unrealizable) opportunity for the characters to make different choices that might have altered the direction of their story arcs, indeed, their lives and deaths. Such nullification of effect is an impossible position in real life, in which the direction of time is unalterable.

That Žižek observes the anxious spectator's response to inescapable events rendered speciously avoidable through a narrative structure in a book about Lacan, is also fitting with regard to Lacan's commentary on Sigmund Freud's concept of the death drive (a concept that recurs differently in the next section, 'The Individual Death Drive and the Auteur Action Film'). In *The Sinthome: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XXIII*, Lacan states that:

[T]here is no progress but bearing the stamp of death...the death drive is the real inasmuch as it can only be pondered qua impossible. This means that each time it rears its head it is imponderable. To approach this impossible could never constitute a hope, because this imponderable is death, whose real grounding is that it cannot be pondered. (2016, 106)

The destruction of bodies in *Irreversible* underscores the impossibility of the death drive, particularly for the avenging characters who gain nothing from attempting to punish the rapist. *Irreversible* is a transgressive film, but perhaps the most radical choice Noé makes is to close his film with a narrative event of incipient life, which does 'constitute a hope', only because the post-classical temporal order of the film allows the characters and spectator to set aside their pondering about death, even within the thematic context of time's essential destructiveness.

At the same time, the film solves a problem of death that Scarre brings up in a discussion of Karl Jaspers' contention that human life is never complete from the perspective



of the deceased subject: 'since death is our impassable boundary and the end of the subjective point of view, it offers no vantage point from which we can take a retrospective look at ourselves' (2007, 40). It is worth noting that *Enter the Void* (2009), Noé's subsequent film, is shot from a subjective perspective of a dead character. The film also unfolds non-chronologically, as the deceased character observes the events from his life after it is finished, thus continuing the director's use of post-classical techniques to visualize impossible mortal states on film.

Pascal Laugier, writer and director of *Martyrs* (2008), another of the more infamous titles within the 'New French Extremity' grouping, has linked the corporeal destruction in his film to a quasi-apocalyptic modern condition. *Martyrs*, like Noé's films, lacks high kill counts but the camera similarly unflinchingly explores individual bodies being tortured and/or killed. In an interview with Ryan Rotten of *Shock Till You Drop*, Laugier commented,

Metaphorically, I would say that the film is a way for me to speak about the times we are living in right now. I have the feeling, like a sad intuition, that our occidental urban societies are filled with despair and brutality. Like a world close to its own end, a world that is going to be replaced by something else. (2008)

## ii. Death and Genre

The next published work in the submission, 'Igniting the Fuse of Destructive History: Nation and Ablation in the sLaughterhouse' (2018) selects a set of films that reflect on national histories of violence. Unlike the more violent and conspicuously post-classical 'New French Extremity' films, which see modern society as ruinous and expiring, the films in 'Igniting the Fuse of Destructive History' hybridize classical film genres with post-classical narrative and cinematic techniques to challenge myths of the past as well as the stability of classical genres.

Bordwell and Thompson have argued that 'genres are tightly bound to cultural factors' and that 'the familiar characterizations and plots of genres may also serve to distract the audience from real social problems' (2010, 336). Perhaps the most unifying aspect of Joel

Coen's *Fargo* (1996), Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012), and Aharon Keshales and Navot Papushado's *Big Bad Wolves* (2013), the three films featured in the chapter, is their inversion of this classical function of genres. Each of the films uses scenes of killing and death to reorient the viewer's attention to social problems and unresolved issues of the past.

There is a parallel between this reexamination of the past and Noé's project in sending his characters backward into their personal histories, which will necessarily end in destruction. Via an inversion of time, Noé's characters realize the impossible that is inherent in the death drive, and this trio of revisionist genre films uses violent deaths to reveal the futility of treating official history as absolute truth. By intentionally weaving folklore into narratives that involve authentic social problems, Coen, Tarantino, Keshales, and Papushado cleverly critique the way fiction distracts from reality. This approach adheres to Lacan's assertion that 'History is the greatest of fantasies...Behind the history of the facts in which historians take an interest, there lies myth' (2016, 105).

Thanouli's framework of post-classical motivations includes 'an archaeological attitude towards classical genericity' (2009, 177), at times with an artistic style of 'parody' (2009, 177), characterizations that denote digging into the past to comically and/or critically transform genres and their cultural effects. This is a fitting way to describe what *Fargo*, *Django Unchained*, and *Big Bad Wolves* achieve through a synthesis of classical genres, folklore, and graphic contemporary screen violence. *Fargo* updates Jacques Tourneur's film noir *Nightfall* (1956), exchanging the beleaguered protagonist of *Nightfall* for a greedy and disloyal car salesman whose actions result in the death of his wife, against the backdrop of the mythical figure Paul Bunyan, an impossibly strong masculine ideal who has no equal.

Another relevant story type in *Fargo* is the true crime genre, with antecedents like Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966) providing a model for exposing occurrences of grisly murders in Midwestern American communities. Within the context of historical poetics, such

violence was once presented as an aberration, including contemporaneous stories about serial killer Ed Gein, whom *The Psycho File* (2009) author Joseph W. Smith III cites as one of the real-life inspirations for Robert Bloch's book *Psycho* (1959) and Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 screen adaptation thereof (2009, 7-12). In *Fargo*, Coen cannily contextualizes the fiction within a false opening title purporting to tell a true story. Throughout, the film parodies its classical antecedents by staging and/or punctuating each significant death scene in the film with physical comedy or sight gags that disrupt the familiarity and fidelity of the classical noir and true crime types, as the film continues to upend the myths of the polite, peaceful Midwestern city.

*Big Bad Wolves* invokes its titular fairy tale to present a story of a threatened young girl whose fate depends on a battle of wits between violent men on either side of the law. In this sense, the film might be viewed as a bloodier, post-classical update on the bifurcated demand for justice in Fritz Lang's *M* (1931). As a groundbreaking Israeli horror film, *Big Bad Wolves* includes a subtext about the fraught Israeli-Palestinian conflict but mostly ignores the specifics of that conflict within the main plot of a child predator being cornered by men willing to take extreme measures to avenge the young victims. Indeed, *Big Bad Wolves* subverts the classical narrative form of the police procedural by equating the avenging violence of the police force and armed forces veterans with the sexual violence of the child predator, erasing the conventional protagonist/antagonist dynamic and upending the traditional moral framework of police procedurals. The most gruesome onscreen murder in *Big Bad Wolves* is an act of extra-judicial justice, not an act of child predation.

The third film, *Django Unchained*, deserves slightly more sustained critical reflection here, as its post-classical techniques, particularly in climactic death scenes, create subsequent fantasies even as the film resists some illusions created by earlier Western genre films (as well as its source myth of Siegfried and Brunhilde). *Django Unchained* is to some extent a

revisionist Western that exists to speculate about a formerly enslaved Black protagonist taking vengeance on those who have enslaved him and his beloved wife. Yet, as stated in the chapter, Django's (Jamie Foxx) violent vengeance must be precisely timed and managed by a European bounty hunter, because to kill one's enemies prematurely would risk sacrificing the prize that is his estranged wife.

This calculative context, which for much of the film's running time includes a rationalization about crime and punishment that men whom the law wants dead deserve to be killed, becomes null and void when Django is free to shoot down his enemies and emerge as a vengeful hero. The fragmented nature of the operatic violence set at a plantation house departs wildly from the one-on-one duel scenario associated with justice and vengeance themes in classic Western films. In *Django Unchained*, the titular protagonist targets flesh and blood in a literal sense, not necessarily the humans bearing that flesh and blood. Many of his victims have no identity apart from their association with the slavery that has victimized the hero. The kinetic style of the cinematography and editing that frames the tearing of flesh and spilling of blood sensationalizes the killing. This spectacle overwhelms the effects of earlier scenes in the film that are comparatively meaningful and restrained in their presentation of violence endured by slaves, which often occurs offscreen and is communicated largely through sound and images of onscreen characters' reactions to the brutality.

Furthermore, *Django Unchained* is indicative of Becker's theory in *The Denial of Death*, that the fear of death prompts individuals to assume a heroic position to an extent that they might feel as if they could stand up to death's inevitability. Tarantino shapes his protagonist in such a way that Django not only avoids being killed for his actions but also reunites with his wife and rides off on a horse, presumably into a brighter future with her. His denial of death is one component of a narrative perspective that would deny the continuing

racial disunity in America following the Civil War, as Tarantino replaces history with a myth of his own making.

*Django Unchained's* climax could be characterized using Devin McKinney's phrase, 'disconnected, uncommitted movie mayhem', a style that McKinney associates with post-classical films, which 'began with James Bond, came of age with the sociopathic crime dramas of the early 1970s and served the reactionary agenda of the 1980s' (1993, 19). In fact, McKinney presciently criticizes Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) with a predictive reference to the milieu of *Django Unchained*, as having 'the same relation to true crime as *Mandingo* had to life in the antebellum South. This is a formalist film-maker's logic, and it has only one self-apparent subject: the set piece' (1993, 21).

In his preoccupation with the violent Western set piece, Tarantino is deeply indebted to the innovations of Sam Peckinpah, whose post-classical approach to the genre evinced a style of narrative closure that *Django Unchained* sustains. In *Film and Reality: An Historical Survey* (1974), Roy Armes singles out the concluding events of Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969) in a way that could just as well be describing the climactic set piece of *Django Unchained*: 'there comes a great burst of savagery, with dozens of men dying in slow motion, technicolor blood spurting most convincingly and a ballet of total destruction being created' (1974, 148). The contested standing of Peckinpah's onscreen violence, specifically the question of whether the filmmaker was celebrating mass killing or framing it as a matter of grim contemplation of mortality, persists in Tarantino's showcase of killing in *Django Unchained*.

Interestingly, Bazin also seems to foresee *Django Unchained* in his comments about the postwar, post-classical western, which he calls the "'superwestern'", a form he defines as 'a western that would be ashamed to be just itself, and looks for some additional interest to justify its existence--an aesthetic, sociological, moral, psychological, political, or erotic

interest, in short some quality extrinsic to the genre and which is supposed to enrich it' (1971, 150-151). Tarantino's positioning of his Western as a corrective against slavery and racism in America simultaneously destabilizes the classical Western form, but its concluding spectacle of killing, its emphasis on a spectacular set piece of deindividualized dead bodies, denudes any enrichment he might have intended.

### **c. The Death Drive and the Auteur Action Film**

The career of filmmaker Kathryn Bigelow, the subject of the next published work included in the submission, stands in opposition to McKinney's critique of 'disconnected, uncommitted movie mayhem' (1993, 19) in post-classical action films and crime dramas. The narrative trajectory of Bigelow's action dramas, as well as the character arcs therein, move towards the innermost drives of her characters rather than merely delivering the outer spectacle and climactic set pieces that are hallmarks of more conventional post-classical action films. 'Variations on the "lonely walk" in the films of Kathryn Bigelow' (2021), published in a special issue of *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, was an outgrowth of a paper of the same name that I originally presented at the University of Wolverhampton's conference 'Kathryn Bigelow: A Visionary Director', which took place at the Light House Media Centre in July 2019.

In 'Variations on "the lonely walk" in the films of Kathryn Bigelow', I classify Bigelow's films *Point Break* (1991), *K-11: The Widowmaker* (2002), and *The Hurt Locker* (2008) as action films 'about men who choose to walk towards danger and risk, who traverse those turbulent spaces that are the camera's subjects' (2021, 279). The article largely emphasizes the spatiotemporal qualities of the set pieces that reveal the characters' inner selves and argues that these character-revealing set pieces are a unifying feature of Bigelow's filmography as well as a key component of her auteur status. Although she is not a credited writer on any of the films explored in the article, her distinct staging of the action across these

works is an indication of her control over the narratives and a component of her consistent vision for how the physical staging of scripted scenarios allows the viewer to identify with the characters, even if the point of that identification frequently is to communicate their experiences within a fragmented and incoherent space of violence.

Bigelow's distinct cinematic approach to conveying violent experiences to her audience is evident in a 1995 interview with *Film Comment's* Gavin Smith. Smith comments that 'arresting or expanding time' in action films contrasts with 'real life' in which 'violence is often over in the blink of an eye' (Jermyn & Redmond 2003, 26). Bigelow responds,

Yes and no. You can take the liberty of a moment of suspension, when something puts you in shock or is cathartic. Time stands still. It's perception, obviously. There's two ways of looking at a moment and they're both cinematic: either suspend it and examine it as if under a magnifying glass, with great detail, or have it be instantaneous, blink and you've missed it -- which is more realistic, but in the *perception* of reality. Suspension of time for me is by cinematic choice and what I would imagine an event to be like. (2003, 26)

These comments reveal that Bigelow distinguishes between '*content* realism' and '*perceptual* realism' (Gaut, 2003, 98) as she designs and directs action sequences involving violence and/or death. This distinction corresponds to Bigelow's alternation of perspective and focalization in such sequences. Each of the films covered in the article juxtaposes open and closed film styles in at least two ways: first, by staging scenes within closed spaces that heighten the physical and dramatic stakes of the action, and second, through isolating protagonists' experiences within those spaces through cinematographic and editing techniques that denote subjectivity.

It is through this closed style, often occurring as characters choose to take 'the lonely walk' towards their own potential or actual deaths, that Bigelow most emphasizes Freudian concepts such as the death drive, repetition compulsion, and potential self-destruction, all of which reinforce the notion that there is an 'individualizing function' in death (Ireton 2007, 282). In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud discusses the repetition compulsion and

observes that individuals who repeat unpleasant or dangerous episodes might seem controlled by externalities, but in reality 'their fate is for the most part arranged by themselves' (2015, 15). Whereas the death drive in a structurally unorthodox film such as *Irreversible* is mostly apparent to the audience because of the order of narrative events rather than the character's self-perceptions, Bigelow's films are wholly concerned with the individual's awareness of his role in his own fate. Bigelow's emphasis on walking towards death contrasts with many of the other films explored in the publications included in this submission, in which characters are attempting to avoid dying or being put in a position where they could die. Indeed, most of Bigelow's protagonists depart from self-preservation in a way that also illustrates Freud's view of death as the very point of life:

The hypothesis of self-preservative instincts, such as we attribute to all living beings, stands in marked opposition to the idea that instinctual life as a whole serves to bring about death. Seen in this light, the theoretical importance of the instincts of self-preservation, of self-assertion and of mastery greatly diminishes. They are component instincts whose function it is to assure that the organism shall follow its own path to death, and to ward off any possible ways of returning to inorganic existence other than those which are immanent in the organism itself. (2015, 33)

Many of Bigelow's characters do assert their individuality to the extent that they choose how they will (certainly or likely) return to a nonliving state. Some of them, like *Point Break's* Bodhi or *The Hurt Locker's* Will James, embody a dual awareness of the ontological (corporeal mortality) and the metaphysical (emotional or spiritual transcendence). By positioning these characters as they walk the lonely walk, in action film set pieces that are entirely focused on the anticipation of death, Bigelow powerfully realizes the anxiety and excitement associated with the limits Koestenbaum and Becker identify concerning the impossibility of the direct death experience.

#### **d. Afterlives and Revivals in Television Series and Documentaries**

The extended narratives of televised or streaming series are another area of post-classical screen stories that have a distinct potential to engage with the ontological and



metaphysical understandings of death. As previously stated in this bridging chapter, the epoch of post-classical cinema follows the tradition of classical cinema (or classical Hollywood cinema) in being predominately defined by the form of feature-length films. However, the rise of high-quality television programming, coinciding with the post-classical cinema era and evolving into modern delivery formats on streaming platforms, provides an opportunity to tell screen stories about death involving a few aspects derived from (or conducive to) the extended narratives and dimensional complexity that befits the storytelling conventions and broader parameters of episodic series. In referring to this part of my submission with the word 'afterlives,' I am referring to several deathly or death-adjacent readings of serialized dramas. These readings include the revival of some series long thought to be dead before being renewed after a period of latency, characters within those series whose corporeal existence has ceased but who live on as ghosts, or, on a more metaphorical level, characters who have experienced significant trauma and who find ways to persist after life-altering devastation. My methods and methodologies for the two writing selections concerning television or streaming series include many of the same foci as the parts of the submission examining feature-length films, with particular attention to structure and auteur screen storytelling.

Within television screenwriting conventions, most series could be categorized as 'anthologies, series with "closure," and "serials"', designations that respectively correspond to 'free-standing stories', stories with 'continuing main casts but new situations that conclude at the end of each episode', and 'drama[s] whose stories continue across many episodes in which the main cast develops over time...the "long narrative"' (Douglas 2011, 15-16). The next published works in the submission focus on two serials, David Lynch and Mark Frost's *Twin Peaks: The Return* (2017) and Mike Flanagan's *The Haunting of Hill House* (2018), shows for which death and the afterlife are essential features of the series' form and content.

There is a parallel between the dichotomy of televised screen stories that close versus those that continue and the opposition between an ontological view of death as real (the end of a being) and the metaphysical view of death as not real (death as a starting point for a spiritual or supernatural reality). Both *Twin Peaks: The Return* and *The Haunting of Hill House* use the serialized form to express a metaphysical perspective, but each one contains distinct speculations about space and time that are reflected in the narratives and production and post-production techniques that realize those narratives for the screen.

In "'Between Two Mysteries": Intermediacy in *Twin Peaks: The Return*', the chapter I contributed to *Critical Essays on Twin Peaks: The Return* (2019), I explored 'the particular way Lynch merges observable material reality with abstraction and immaterial activity' (2019, 108) in the revival of his popular television series that aired a quarter of a century following the original two seasons in the early 1990s. That *Twin Peaks* returned after such an unusually long period of latency poses the central question of the plot itself, which is whether the past can return and whether those who were long ago considered dead be brought back to life. In the case of the deceased character Laura Palmer (Sheryl Lee), whose death provided the central dramatic question of the original seasons, *Twin Peaks: The Return* speculates on whether her death itself might be undone from the original narrative, a radical development that upends the series' entire reason for existing.

My chapter covers several examples of 'the dualism and paradoxes of material/immaterial interaction' (2019, 108) in the series, but one that deserves elaboration in this submission is the show's post-classical remixing of footage from the original series. Where Laura Palmer's telltale dead body once appeared, *Twin Peaks: The Return* digitally erases it, literalizing the speculation that wonders what the town of Twin Peaks would be like if Laura Palmer had never died. One of the ironies of *Twin Peaks: The Return* is that the series achieves its revival by altering the original series' basic circumstances, denying the

character an afterlife by forcing her back into material reality. *Twin Peaks* only lives again by effacing the original; narrative speculation that the remixed footage makes clear.

"'Came Back Haunted': International Horror Film Conventions in *The Haunting of Hill House* (Netflix 2018)", my chapter from *The Streaming of Hill House* (2020) is similarly themed insofar as *The Haunting of Hill House* also adapts a preexisting source (in this case, Shirley Jackson's 1959 novel) only to radically depart from that source. However, whereas *Twin Peaks: The Return* emphasizes the danger of interfering with an immaterial realm that no one among the living can truly understand or compete with, *The Haunting of Hill House* concludes with an affirmative message of simultaneity: even the worst seeming horrors of the show are merely signs that spiritual reality always coexists with physical reality. In the series, skepticism and denial regarding that spiritual reality are in some cases more potent obstacles to the plot than the apparent ghosts are. "'Came Back Haunted'" illustrates how this narrative perspective is heavily indebted to Japanese horror films, whose traditions frequently emphasize the coexistence of physical and spiritual beings. It is also worth noting that the key to *The Haunting of Hill House's* arrangement of planes of existence hinges on the physical features of the house's structure such as doors and walls, which are concrete realizations of Mason's wall and door metaphors for death.

The final published work in this submission involves a final contrast to join the many divisions involved in theories of death and filmic expressions thereof. In documentary films, layers of artifice and reality combine to communicate a more ostensibly factual screen story, compared with purely fictional counterparts such as scripted feature films or scripted television and streaming series. In *Realism and the Cinema*, Christopher Williams observes that in documentary film (even in the allegedly purest form of direct cinema), 'it is always cinema we are dealing with, that everything shown by film is fiction, the fiction of a fiction, or the fiction of a film-document' (1980, 235). My essay 'Picturing the Last Moments of Life'

(2013), presented in the submission in an archived form as it originally appeared in the now non-operational peer-reviewed online journal *Jura Gentium Cinema*, analyzes the processes and ethics of chronicling stories of deceased subjects in documentary films. My previous methods and methodologies regarded various aspects of textual analysis involving feature-length films and a comparative digression into televised or streaming series. The final work included in the submission illustrates Williams' theory that documentaries are fiction (of a sort) by examining the authorship and editing techniques of documentaries from the post-classical era, especially those authorship and editing techniques which seemingly achieve the impossible by bringing deceased subjects back to life on screen in order to tell mediated stories of their actual deaths.

The three films featuring deceased subjects, Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man* (2005), Kurt Kuenne's *Dear Zachary: A Letter to a Son About His Father* (2008), and David and Albert Maysles' and Charlotte Zwerin's *Gimme Shelter* (1970), all cinematographically revive their deceased protagonists through a variety of means, piecing together lives that have already ended into documents that (like all screen stories) unfold in the present tense. More than any other film or television series included in the submission, these films are primarily instructive for their editing techniques, first, because documentary films are generally more post-production intensive as a storytelling measure, and second because in these particular films, there is no possibility of capturing new footage of the dead protagonists. Building on connective qualities (intellectual, emotional, and physical) identified by *Documentary Dilemmas* (1991) authors Carolyn Anderson and Thomas W. Benson, my essay compares the filmmakers' approaches to depicting the death experiences of Timothy Treadwell in *Grizzly Man*, Andrew Bagby in *Dear Zachary*, and Meredith Hunter in *Gimme Shelter*.

As stated elsewhere in this submission, a popular perspective on death is that death cannot be experienced directly, but merely through approximation and metaphor. Consistent

with this theory, the filmmakers responsible for these documentaries are not expected to achieve the full experience of death for themselves, their subjects, or their audience, and so film editing offers tools of approximation and metaphor. What is most interesting about their use of these tools is how each comes to define the experience of the movie in full, thus imprinting intellect, emotion, or physicality as features of their subjects' deaths, even if those deaths were not previously characterized by those associations.

Furthermore, although these works are documentaries and therefore not scripted in a conventional screenwriting sense, they all involve the often hidden narrative principle Žižek identifies as 'the radical contingency of the enchainment of narration, the fact that, at every point, things might have turned out otherwise' (1992, 69). Though the three films differ greatly in the associative techniques the filmmakers use to approximate the deaths of their subjects, each documentary uses non-chronological structures and other speculative aural and visual techniques, some quite reflexive, to engage the viewer's mind about other ways the deceased men's lives might have turned out--indeed, whether they still might be living had the real-life events occurred differently. These speculations are ultimately the 'fiction of a film-document' (1980, 235), but they are also what keeps the subject alive for the viewer.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

In this bridging chapter, I have identified the means through which post-classical screen storytelling, including feature films, television and streaming series, and documentaries express death scenarios, illustrating how death is a fruitful subject for contemporary approaches to writing, directing, and editing screen stories. All of the works featured in the previously published chapters and articles belong to the post-classical period, and I have made connections between these death-focused works and theories and speculations regarding death from the same period (the late 1960s to the present). By situating these films, series, and documentaries within a bridging chapter that first defines the

post-classical era and provides an overview of contemporary speculations about death, I have re-engaged with my previously published works to unearth connections between them that evince the ways in which fundamental questions and observations about death pervade many distinct aspects of screen stories, including themes, narrative structure, genres, auteurism, and television/streaming and documentary storytelling. By illustrating the relevancy of death across these components of the art and craft of film as well as the post-classical innovations that occur when exploring death as a subject, this submission is beneficial for film scholars and filmmakers aiming to discover the links between death as a subject and its realization in screen stories.

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## Appendix